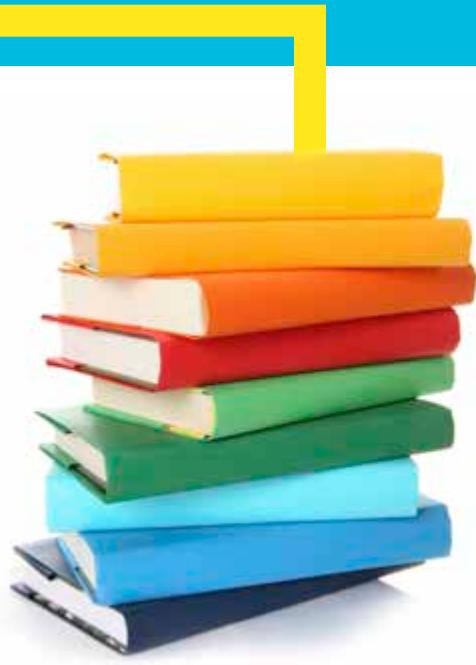


Traditional Literacy *and* **CRITICAL THINKING**



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SCHOOL LIBRARIANS ARE WELL POSITIONED FOR MAKING SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO READING DEVELOPMENT BY FOCUSING ON THE INTEGRATION OF CRITICAL THINKING AND TRADITIONAL LITERACY. THE INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUD IS A KEY STRATEGY.

A significant challenge for today's educators is a pivot in the common understanding of best practices for teaching and learning. School librarians should welcome this shift away from the "student as vessel" model of teaching to a more constructivist model intent upon developing critical-thinking skills that enable students to make their own meaning for deeper understandings (Rainie 2014). In the No Child Left Behind era, teachers focused on ensuring students acquired a body of discrete skills and knowledge. Contemporary pedagogies embrace the idea that discrete skills and knowledge act as critical building blocks for success, but the ultimate goal is to prepare students for a lifetime of learning. How students show what they can do with that knowledge and how they demonstrate application of learning processes in real-world situations are the best indicators of their future success.

School libraries reflect this change in thinking; Joan Frye Williams's analogy frames libraries as no longer being grocery stores stocked with ingredients but kitchens where ingredients are combined to create something new (Valenza

2008). As traditional hierarchical models of learning transition to inquiry models grounded in critical thinking, application, and performance, teaching and learning through the lens of literacies is an approach that makes sense for school library programs.

Literacy and School Libraries

Since their inception, libraries have been associated with literacy. But what is literacy? In the traditional sense it is the acquisition and practice of reading and writing. Consider the new literacies that are explored in this issue, and the definition can be expanded to an applied understanding and performance in a system or environment of practice. The literate practitioner must have the ability to decode and create within a defined context. Literacy development under this definition targets proficiency in areas of functional understanding, communication, and culture. Traditional literacy and information literacy have been the school library's instructional bread and butter for generations. Including new literacies such as data literacy, global literacy, and visual literacy among others provides frameworks

for instruction that encompass students' real-world experiences and prepare them for success in the future. How school librarians focus on activating critical thinking through traditional literacy development can proactively set the stage for the deep thinking that occurs in all literacy development.

Traditional Literacy and the School Librarian

The school librarian's role in traditional literacy development is as critical as ever. At the elementary level, a balanced literacy approach integrates explicit teaching such as guided reading and word study with read-alouds and shared reading. While teaching of reading and writing skills may commonly be considered the classroom teacher's domain, limited time in a school day may prevent a classroom teacher from providing read-aloud experiences as often as needed. The school library is where the mechanics of literacy are put into practice.

The library provides ready access to reading across platforms. Books—in print and online—magazines, websites, and apps are the playground for engagement with text and graphics. Additionally, in

the school library students have opportunities to engage in reading and writing through a variety of activities, including, of course, read-alouds. Read-alouds have long been a staple of elementary library visits but *how* and *why* read-alouds are conducted make a tremendous difference in the literacy development of students. Fully literate students seamlessly navigate the system of words and meaning as an integrated whole, and then connect what they've read with their own thoughts, opinions, and experiences to create new understandings. Bottom line: It's the thinking that matters. School librarians are well positioned for making significant contributions to reading development by focusing on the integration of critical thinking and traditional literacy. The interactive read-aloud is a key strategy.

Why Interactive Read-Alouds?

Students should be practicing what real readers do—construct personal meaning from their reading. Interactive read-alouds enable students to hone their thinking skills with their school librarian before they have the fluency to do so independently. Librarians often are terrific storytellers who read picture books with animation and enthusiasm. Asking comprehension questions and prompting the audience to make predictions is standard practice to engage students. However, the interactive read-aloud is a specific and planned strategy that ignites curiosity and ensures that all students activate critical-thinking skills. Research shows interactive read-alouds as part of a balanced literacy approach increase comprehension, support students' content background knowledge, boost vocabulary, and assist in development of independent reading and

writing of similar texts (Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard 2011).

A significant benefit of interactive read-alouds is how they encourage students to think actively before, during, and after reading. When students engage in a meaningful conversation about a book's ideas and presentation, they are empowered to articulate connections and make their thinking visible to others (Hilden and Jones 2013). Students require direct instruction in how to integrate with their prior knowledge what they are hearing, seeing, and reading. The conversation must go beyond recall to exploring the "big ideas" in a fiction or nonfiction text and making meaning for themselves (Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard 2011). These conversations can bring great pleasure to the reading experience, not unlike the discussions readers enjoy in book clubs. The ultimate outcome is that students' enthusiasm for engaging in higher-level thinking leads to accomplished independent reading and benefits student learning across disciplines.

Planning for Interactive Read-Alouds

Katherine Hilden and Jennifer Jones provide guidance in crafting an experience for students that will activate deeper learning. Two fundamental aspects to keep in mind:

1. An interactive experience takes planning. It is more than a straight read through followed by a few improvised questions.
2. Questions are open-ended. The reader does not share her opinion or imply that an answer is right or wrong. The focus is on the students' thinking.

EXTEND STUDENTS' THINKING BY ENCOURAGING THEM TO:

MAKE A CONNECTION

text-to-text

USE TEXT to activate prior knowledge

PRACTICE visualization

SELF-MONITOR their understanding and ask questions

THINK ALOUD

when answering a challenging question

EXPLORE

relationships between pictures and text

(Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard 2011)

Interactive read-alouds should serve a specific purpose—not every book can be effectively used this way. Collaborate with classroom teachers to choose titles that make connections to students' learning and life experiences. Consider titles that are accessible but challenging enough to offer new vocabulary or ideas. Imagine how a particular book will engage students. It should be a rich experience that compels students to interact. How can they make connections with prior knowledge? Classroom content? How curious will they be in exploring the structure, visuals, and big ideas of the story (2013)?

Purposeful Observations and Questions Bring a High Return in Engagement

At the core of an interactive read-aloud is the prompting and questioning of the reader. To begin a session, the reader should plan an opening. For example, offering listeners a connection to a previous text, an invitation to examine an aspect of the illustrations or story structure, or a description of the genre all help focus attention and anticipate the reading (Fountas and Pinnell 2006, 226). Readers never ask a question that they already know the answer to. As the reader, ask interpretive questions rather than factual. One way to know that questions will activate thinking is to assess whether they are focused on big ideas rather than on details of the text.

Questions that connect beyond the text are more likely to require thinking and still reveal students' comprehension. Prompt students to consider important information in different contexts or to speculate why the author and illustrator made certain choices. When students offer answers, be sure to dig deeper. Why do they think what they do?

What can they point to in the text or pictures that supports their ideas? Ask students what they are wondering. "Can anyone expand on this idea or present a different point of view?" One way to ensure everyone is interacting is to match students with partners so they can "buzz" about their thoughts before sharing with the larger group (Hilden and Jones 2013).

Assessing and Extending Learning

Extend student thinking after the read-aloud by providing time for reflection. The reading-writing connection is vital to literacy development, but students can also use multi-modal forms of expression (Hilden and Jones 2013). Drawing or recording audio or video reflections offers an effective way to assess students' understanding and critical thinking. When collaborating with the teacher about the read-aloud, it may make sense to have the reflection take place in the classroom so that the teacher can engage with the experience as well, help students make additional connections, and manage time effectively.

Gateway to a World of Literacies

The critical-thinking skills students build while becoming accomplished readers and writers provide the foundation for learning in a variety of environments. This *Knowledge Quest* issue explores student engagement in understanding and using data and graphics, cultivating global and visual literacies, and applying inquiry processes—all of which require skills in observation, questioning, and making connections, skills that evolve through traditional literacy development. The school librarian's

role in ensuring students master skills essential for success in their future academic and real-life experiences begins with supporting their development of critical thinking as learners work toward proficiency in traditional literacy tasks.



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